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ABSTRACT

Americans have long had and deserved the stereotypical reputation of knowing little about the language and cultures of other nations. Most college students, including language majors, leave higher education with inadequate language skills, and many high school language teachers are also in need of improved skills. The reliance of literature to teach culture is also inadequate. Overseas study can improve both knowledge of language and understanding of culture, but study abroad programs are generally offered as a supplement to language study rather than a key component. Overseas study, which should be required by schools and supported by both government and the business community, should be undertaken only after 3 years of successful college-level study. Students studying overseas should be carefully prepared for the experience before them. Once abroad, the student's family-living experience should be monitored by the home institution. Internships combined with academic study could enhance the experience dramatically. An integrated overseas program would include a preparatory course or seminar, appropriate housing, courses tailored to the needs of participants, work experience, and follow-up upon return to the United States. (LB)

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A Case for Overseas Study and Internships
(Delivered March 28, 1992)

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Americans have long had the stereotypical reputation of knowing little about either the languages or the cultures of other nations. English-speaking Canadians remain virtual strangers, and our French Canadian or Mexican neighbors are as remote as Mongolians. While this portrait is indeed painted with a broad brush, many present-day college students--most perhaps--remain abysmally ignorant of foreign countries and especially of their cultures. There are few students who can make a cogent comment about another country, other than to evoke the portrait of the wine-loving French lover in a beret or the sombreroed Mexican whose favorite activity is the siesta. While we might blame our educational system for the particular ignorance of our college students, it might also be suggested that the nation as a whole, which has lived self-satisfied and prosperous for so long on this rich, fertile and remote island, is ultimately responsible because it has not needed to know either other languages or the ways of life of other nations. We have preferred, instead, to let them come to us.

We are beginning to discover, rather late, that we can no longer live in glorious isolation. Our governments are starting to realize that we are no longer the only big stick in the universe, and that a number of other nations may rightfully

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command our respect. At the same time, our nation is becoming painfully aware that our prosperity is inexorably linked with the prosperity of many other nations, all of which are only a few hours away in this jet age. Our students are increasingly becoming aware that business will become more and more international, and we find many now making something of a effort to learn a foreign language (although I often think that they do so for its effect on their CV rather than because of any perceived practical benefit from knowing a foreign language).

Many of us remember the shock of Sputnik in 1957, and the resulting frenzied lip-service that was paid to improving the teaching of languages and mathematics. I would argue that the results have not been impressive. While those of us within the profession may be only too painfully aware that language study is a long and arduous process, we have not, I believe, conveyed the importance of a serious and especially of a sustained study of foreign languages to many students. Students continue to take a year or two of a foreign language, and then voice the traditional complaint that they "never learned to speak it." A fair number of students take third-year college courses in a foreign language, but by the fourth year, attrition has taken a serious toll and it is typically only language majors and a very few diehard others who continue to the point--at about graduation time--when some really insightful learning can take place. It is stating--or overstating--the obvious to say that most of the students who go through three years of college-level foreign language courses are

inadequately prepared to use that language in any professional context. At the end of four years, the very best language majors are on the verge of being able to make practical use of the language. In my experience, these individuals are the exception, rather than the rule, and do not represent the much larger group of students with majors in business, political science or international relations who do not have to complete a major but nonetheless want to be able to use a foreign language in their career.

Language and literature departments pay lip service to cultural studies, but these, in fact, are often given short shrift in college-level foreign language programs. In traditional curricula, all roads ultimately lead to the study of literature, although language majors may be required to take one brief overview of the civilization of the mother country--France, or Spain, for example. Proponents of this approach argue that literature is a great medium for the study of culture. My own view is that literary texts are far too subtle a school, and that the traditionally-required single civilization course is hardly adequate for giving our future internationalists an understanding of the many-faceted mores of nations with which they may be dealing.

Our high-school foreign language teachers are the products of our university programs. My own experience over the past few years with in-service programs for high-school French teachers shows that they need as desperately as anyone to acquire adequate

language skills and to possess knowledge in depth about the foreign nations whose languages they teach. Because they do not have access to fellowships, or even to the directorships of the overseas study programs which allow college professors to reside overseas for extended periods of time, the high-school teachers tended to know French little better than does a graduating senior major, and because they had had little occasion to travel and especially to reside abroad, they were poorly informed as to the ways of life of the foreign countries whose language they taught. Although we cannot blame high-school teachers completely for the ignorance of our language students, it would be a step in the right direction if high-school teachers, too, were cognizant to some depth of the cultures of the foreign countries with which they deal in their classes.

We know, of course, that overseas study can go far in remedying the dual problem of inadequate knowledge of a foreign language and of ignorance of foreign cultures. Overseas study programs have been around for many years, beginning with "junior-year abroad" many years ago and progressing to the profusion of quarter-, semester- or summer-length courses that are now available at many colleges and universities, directly or through consortia. Overseas study is touted as a delightful way to improve both a student's knowledge of a foreign language and his appreciation of the culture of another country. Unfortunately, overseas study programs are offered as a <u>supplement</u> to language

study, a plum to be enjoyed by those who can afford the substantial cost.

I believe that if we as a profession would suggest that we can seriously prepare our students for the "international future," we must rethink the matter of overseas study. Overseas study should, first of all, be required of all language majors, and it should be very seriously proposed to students who are interested in careers with any kind of international connection. The financial objection looms large, but I do not believe it to be insurmountable if colleges and universities make an effort to provide financial aid, and especially if they pledge themselves to look for outside financing, as they are wont to do for programs in other areas. Government and the business-community itself could be called on, in their own self interest, to contribute to financial-aid packages the better to prepare future executives and foreign-service personnel. In addition, business faculties could be encouraged to create obligatory overseas study programs, perhaps to be jointly administered with language departments.

As we consider the possibility of more extensive student participation in overseas study, we need to examine the nature of the overseas study experience itself. A typical overseas program sends students for a term or a summer to an institute which has been established to teach foreigners. The course work, while bearing American numbers, may have little to do with the courses at the home institution. This is excused by saying that anything

done abroad is good for our students. While the students are at the institute, they may socialize with other foreigners, but rarely with students from their host country, who are, understandably, not students at the institute. Tours to interesting historical sites may be offered, and students may be lodged in households which purport to provide a "home experience."

I believe, of course, that overseas study programs can be invaluable, but that they often suffer from several defects, some of which have already been alluded to. First of all, it is not uncommon to allow students to go abroad after only one year of college-level language study. Such students <u>may</u> profit from an overseas experience, although they also risk a considerable shock when they come face-to-face with the difficulty of communicating even their most basic needs. It would be prudent to require at least <u>three</u> years of successful college-level language study as a prerequisite, and even better, the overseas study experience could be the capstone to an undergraduate education. Students who had had four years of college-level language study, including courses in composition and translation, would be ripe for the experience of using their foreign-language in a real-life setting, and would be best able to integrate the colloquial forms of speech which many would be hearing for the first time.

In addition to adequate language background, students going abroad need considerably more preparation than they typically receive for the cultural experience they are about have.

Traditional civilization courses do little to prepare anyone for contact with the daily ways of life of another nation. It is true that there may be an introductory lecture or two, outlining the do's and don't's of dealing with host families (e.g., stay out of the refrigerator, say "Madame" or "Señora" unless invited to be more informal, remember that you are an ambassador from your own country), but most such brief introductions to the daily life of another country can only scratch the surface. While it might be an impossible dream to expect that an extensive amount of time be given over to courses preparatory to overseas study, it should be possible in many cases to include a special seminar as part of the program. This could take the form of a one-term course, or failing that, of a short but intensive indoctrination course just prior to departure. Students often need to know little things about daily protocol--formulas of politeness and other informative tidbits which may help our students fit in superficially abroad--but they also need to have their eyes opened to the relativity of culture, to the ways in which nations tend to relate differently to a number of things which we may take for granted to be correct <u>our</u> way. I am referring to the way another society tends to view such things, often quite abstract, as the importance of tradition versus progress and change, the relationship of the citizen to government and authority, typical family structures, parental authority and received ideas on child-raising, elitism in education, real or <u>de facto</u> class structure, community spirit, the nature of political life, and

the economic structure and its impact on citizens (it would be important to know, for example, how the economic structure of a country affected the likelihood of social or financial betterment of some citizens, as is so notably the case in some Latin American countries).

Once overseas, students should by all means be given the best possible experience in living with families who want more than just a supplementary income. It is not unusual for families in other countries to take in foreign students but at the same time offer them little more than a bed and certain meals. This is, I think, a problem that it is easy to wave away by saying that any family-living experience abroad is going to be a profitable one for our students, and that it is, after all, a situation that is impossible to control long distance. Michigan State's program at Tours, France, ran into this problem a few years ago. We hired a carefully-chosen on-site coordinator (a resident of Tours) to control the quality of the so-called family-living experience. After a short period of triage of less-than-satisfactory families, our host families have turned in very satisfactory performances.

I have already mentioned overseas course work that has little to do with what is done stateside. While it is certainly not a bad thing for our students to experience other ways of study--this certainly fits in with the notion of seeing the way things are done in other cultures--program organizers need at least to give some serious thought to this aspect of overseas

study. It is possible, in some cases, to create tailor-made courses for our students. After many years of association with a large, well-run but rather inflexible institute at Tours, Michigan State found a smaller, private, teaching group that was adaptable and willing to accommodate itself more to our desires. Business-oriented programs might consider, for example, some of the special courses offered by such organisms as the Parisian Chamber of Commerce, which must have analogues in other countries.

As valuable as traditional overseas study programs undoubtedly are in exposing American students, however briefly, to life abroad, I think that they fall short of the possibilities that we could be offering students who have interests in internationally-related careers. A most valuable part of the preparation of such students would be an internship through which they could gain experience in some area of work related to the projected career. It seems feasible that internships could be combined with academic study, either concurrently or sequentially. Conceivably, organizations abroad which were willing to sponsor internships would take upon themselves the task of teaching interns the workings of the organizations into which students are placed, along with providing instruction in any special vocabulary needed in that work.

Finally, a major weakness that I have observed, at least in our own programs, is that students who return from overseas study programs are simply allowed to drift away on the four winds. By

not following up on the overseas experience, we are probably doing our students a major disservice. A summing up of the experience could be as valuable as the pre-departure preparatory course, especially if program participants were brought together to share their experiences, positive or negative, and most important, if they were asked to compare what they expected to experience with what they had in fact seen. It would not be necessary for a follow-up experience to take a long time or to cost very much. Bringing participants together--overseas, at the end of the program, or on campus, if that is feasible--would be an excellent way to cement impressions and especially to have students focus on what they have learned. It would seem that at this time the relativity of cultures would be most apparent, and the most should be made of the proximity of the experience to draw upon it for a concluding overview.

To sum up, an integrated overseas program would include a preparatory course or seminar, appropriate housing with families who showed a genuine interest in an active relationship with their student borders, courses tailored as much as possible to the needs of participants, a work experience, related if possible to the participants' fields of study or intended career, and a follow-up upon return to help students establish a meaningful perspective on their recent experiences overseas. All this is a tall order, but the results could be truly impressive.